09/830757
18 Rec'd PCT/PTO 30 APR 2001

[2345/154]

DEVICE AND METHOD FOR THE TEMPERATURE-INDEPENDENT OPERATION OF ELECTRO-OPTICAL SWITCHES ON THE BASIS OF FERROELECTRIC LIQUID CRYSTALS HAVING A DEFORMED HELIX

The present invention is directed to a device according to the definition of the species in Claim 1 and to a method according to the definition of the species in Claim 6 for the temperature-independent operation of electro-optical switches on the basis of ferroelectric liquid crystals having a deformed helix.

For some 20 years now, optical liquid crystals have fundamentally changed display technology. As economically priced light valves, they are also often used in the switching of the optical flow of information. The development of ferroelectric liquid crystals has moved switching times into the microsecond range. However, the fact that most of a liquid crystal's physical parameters are highly temperature dependent is still causing problems. Many technical instruments require that the components exhibit the same properties within a broad temperature range. In vehicle construction, in particular, temperature requirements are from -30° C through +80° C. Optical overload-protection switches in open-air video-monitoring systems can also be exposed to such temperatures.

Examples of other applications are birefringent interference filters, which are spectrally tuned with the aid of liquid crystals (C. BARTA, et al., Crystal Optical Interference Filter, European Patent 0 907 089 A2).

So-called optically or electrically addressable, spatially resolving liquid crystal modulators (OASLM, EASLM), used to convert incoherent image information into

coherent image information, were only able to be operated in known methods heretofore within narrow temperature ranges, since their switching times vary considerably in response to temperature.

The object of the present invention is, therefore, to alleviate the above-described disadvantages and to provide, in particular, a device and a method which will substantially reduce temperature-dependent influences and attendant long switching times.

This objective is achieved by a device having the features of Claim 1 and by a method having the features of Claim 6.

In accordance with the present invention, a device and a method are provided, where ferroelectric liquid crystals exhibit temperature-independent and very short switching times, within a broad range, and, therefore, can be used quite advantageously for optical open-air switches and in vehicles.

The present invention advantageously provides for an optical liquid crystal modulator to be used, where the ferroelectric liquid crystals have a DHF mode and are preferably operated within a range of the electric field of more than 20V/μm. As a result, within a frequency range substantially above 50 kHZ, the modulator has a temperature-independent and extremely low response time.

On the basis of preferred exemplary embodiments and with reference to the enclosed drawing, the present invention is described in greater detail in the following. The figures show:

Figure 1: The dependence of electric field E_c, necessary for complete winding of the helix, on the

switching frequency f at T = 20.0°C, the measurement being performed on a 2.0 μm thick cell in the liquid crystalline mixture FLC-388, and the helical pitch Po, at a temperature T = 20.0°C, having the value of 0.22 μm;

Figure 2: The dependence of switching time τ of effective tilt angle θ_{eff} and of contrast ratio CR on the frequency of the electric field. Layer thickness d=1.8 μm, 20 V_{pp}, T=35°C;

Figure 3: The temperature dependence of switching time $\tau_{0.1-0.9}$ in the DHF mode at a frequency f = 130 kHz and E = ±15 V/μm (curve 1) and when switching the completely unwound state (E > E_u) at f=10 kHz and E = ±15 V/μm (curve 2), the temperature dependence of tilt angle θ in the DHF mode at f = 130 kHz and E = ±15 V/μm (measuring curve 3) and in the unwound state at f = 10 kHz and E = 15 V/μm (curve 4).

Summary of the Invention

The present invention employs ferroelectric liquid crystals for modulating light in liquid crystal modulators, whose design, in particular external electrodes made especially of transparent material, and whose cells are well known to one skilled in the art in this field, so that there is no need to describe the mechanical and electrical set-up in greater detail.

Ferroelectric liquid crystals are used, whose helix has a small pitch (< 300 μm) and is able to be continuously

deformed through application of a small electric field (so-called DHF mode). This DHF mode makes it possible to continuously vary the effective tilt angle Θ_{eff} and the effective birefringence Δn_{eff} at low voltages (< 5V) and short switching times (< 1ms). The effective tilt angle is equivalent in size to half of the angle of rotation of the indicatrix of the liquid crystal in the electric field; i.e., the greater the effective tilt angle is, the more intense the rotation of the indicatrix of the liquid crystal.

Since optical liquid crystal modulators are designed on the basis of the DHF mode as lambda/2 magnification plates which rotate in the electric field, a single pass through the plate requires tilt angles of $\pm$ 22.5 degrees in order to completely extinguish polarized light in the switching state "OFF" and obtain full transparency in the switching state "ON".

The electric field E_U, which is required for complete winding of the helix and which thereby induces the desired tilt angle, is relatively small at low frequencies (Figure 1, E_U ~0.5 through 1 V/μm at frequencies f smaller than 1 kHz). At higher frequencies, this critical field strength increases; in addition, the tilt angle also decreases; see Figures 1 and 2.

At frequencies above 50 kHz, fields E_U> 20 V/μm are necessary in order to completely unwind the helix. Thus, the region in which the DHF effect can be utilized is shifted toward higher fields.

Since higher fields are disadvantageous due to the higher voltages on the liquid crystal and, moreover, lead to smaller tilt angles, till now, this region was not considered to be interesting from a technical standpoint.

Figure 1 depicts the dependency of electric field E_c, necessary for a complete winding of the helix, on switching frequency f at T = 20.0°C. The measurement was performed on a 2.0 μm thick cell in a self-produced liquid crystalline mixture FLC-388. The helical pitch Po amounts to 0.22 μm at a temperature of T = 20.0° C. In addition, at a temperature of approximately T = 20.0° C, i.e., at about room temperature, the helical pitch Po lies within a range of 0.1 to 0.5.

With higher frequencies, however, the response time τ is lowered by more than one order of magnitude, while tilt angle Θ remains virtually constant up to very high frequencies (Figure 2). Thus, it may be that the contrast ratio and the birefringence also drop with the switching time, but acceptable values are still achieved for applications.

Figure 2 illustrates the dependency of switching time τ of the effective tilt angle Θ_{eff} and of the contrast ratio CR on the frequency of the electric field at a layer thickness of d = 1.8 μm and 20 V_{pp}, as well as at a temperature of T = 35°C.

As an example, Figure 3 depicts a measurement of response time τ as a function of the temperature for such a liquid crystal system. While at 10 kHz, response time τ is heavily temperature-dependent for an operation of the liquid crystal (curve 2), at an operating frequency of 130 kHz, it is not only very short, but also absolutely thermally stable (curve 1). In this context, the effective tilt angle changes only slightly, and the temperature dependency (curve 3 + 4) does not become significant until temperatures greater than 50°C.

By extensively optimizing the mixtures, as expected, a

high-speed liquid crystal switch is able to be developed in accordance with the present invention for an application range of -20 through 80° C.